



Fragmented Identities: Migration and the Quest for Belonging in Contemporary Diasporic Narratives

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Abstract— This paper explores the complex intersections of displacement, gender, and identity through a comparative analysis of Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story "Clothes." This research investigates how migrant people negotiate the emotional and sociocultural terrain of belonging and alienation in host nations. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Iain Chambers' concept of migrancy and Homi Bhabha's vernacular cosmopolitanism, the paper highlights how diasporic subjects confront and reconfigure notions of selfhood in transnational contexts. Alvarez's García sisters and Divakaruni's Sumita embody the struggles and possibilities of hybrid identity formation, caught between the pressures of assimilation and the pull of cultural memory. Both narratives reveal how diasporic women endure dual marginalizations—based on race, gender, and geography—yet assert agency through acts of cultural negotiation, resistance, and self-fashioning. The analysis underscores that identity in the diaspora is not a fixed essence but a fluid, fractured, and evolving construct shaped by displacement, trauma, and adaptation.



Keywords— Hybrid, Resistance, Identity, Migration, Negotiation

I. INTRODUCTION

Migrancy involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation. Always in transit, the promise of a home coming –completing the story, domesticating the detour – becomes an impossibility. History gives way to histories, as the West gives way to the world. (Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* 5)

By observing nature, we come to understand that it offers the foundational model for human mobility and the establishment of new settlements in response to survival imperatives. The migratory patterns of birds, characterized by their seasonal movement across diverse geographical regions, exemplify an innate ability to adapt to varying climatic conditions. In a parallel manner, the dispersal mechanisms of plants—through agents such as wind, water, and animals—facilitate the propagation of species across

different ecosystems. These natural processes underscore the foundational principles of mobility and environmental adaptation that have historically informed human strategies for migration and habitation. Traveling has become an integral part of the human experience, and the exchange of cultures and ideas has been commonplace since ancient times. Diaspora literature encompasses writings that explore the complexities of migration, focusing on the life experiences of migrants both before and after settling in a new country. This genre is rich with emotions, nostalgic reflections on the homeland, and the difficulties and challenges of integrating into a new society. It often highlights problems with adapting to new cultures and the conflicts or challenges encountered in the new environment. Narratives of migration differ based on the migrant's background and their country of origin. When migrating from developing to developed countries, migrants face significant challenges related to language and cultural assimilation. While these narratives may draw from the writer's personal experiences, they are largely fictional and

represent the broader migrant condition. Migration literature also delves into the complex emotions of admiration and, at times, resentment towards the host nation. Some stories depict successful settlement in the new land, while others focus on troubled memories and new challenges. The pressure of adapting to a new country can lead to a loss of self and identity, mental health issues, and even the desire to return home. Migrant narratives encompass stories of both voluntary and involuntary migration. Voluntary migration may be driven by personal needs or growth, the desire to join family members, or, in the case of return migration, a wish to reconnect with the ancestral homeland. Involuntary migration, on the other hand, can result from natural disasters, wars, partitions, government resettlement programs, and illegal trafficking of workers, among other reasons. These factors vary based on the government's immigration policies. Migrants from poorer countries often struggle with acceptance and assimilation in developed countries due to differences in culture, skills, and their ability to earn a livelihood, which pose challenges for both the migrants and the host communities. The continuous movement of diasporic individuals highlights their state of 'homelessness.' Diasporic discourse addresses the challenge of finding a home for those without a stable roof over their heads due to natural, political, or professional reasons. These individuals strive to establish their stories, languages, and cultures wherever they go. It is nearly impossible for diasporic people to dream of an incontrovertible past. Instead, they illuminate a hybridized interpretation of diasporic consciousness. They must be vocal about reassessing and renegotiating their roles based on differences, without adhering to a fixed opinion or homogeneous truth. Diasporic individuals can navigate between cultures and renegotiate traditions, embodying what Homi Bhabha terms 'vernacular cosmopolitanism.' This concept emphasizes 'locality' and insists on its own terms while engaging in broader national and societal conversations. It is not an elite cosmopolitanism inspired by universalist humanist ideals that seek to establish a unified, enlightened global culture. Instead, vernacular cosmopolitans must engage in cultural translation as a means of survival. Their specific and local histories, often threatened and suppressed, are woven into the fabric of dominant cultural practices.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a detailed literature review, re-examining and re-analysing selected works with a focus on critical objectivity. Various articles, book chapters, published theses, and books are cited to highlight that, although numerous studies have been conducted on the

chosen literary texts, no comprehensive study has yet been undertaken. This gap underscores the originality of this research.

In her Paper titled "A Study on the Predicament of Parsis in the Selected Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry," S. Mary Hemalatha explores the identity struggles, achievements, and cultural conditions of the Parsi community in the Indian subcontinent. Both Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa depict the fortunes and culture of this ethnic community in their literary works. In novels such as *Ice-Candy Man*, *The Pakistani Bride*, *An American Brat*, and *The Crow Eaters*, Sidhwa provides an authentic portrayal of the Parsi community. *An American Brat* specifically highlights the diasporic experience of Feroza, the central character, illustrating the community's complex position between their homeland and the new world. This quest for acculturation subtly underpins the narrative of the novel. In the article "Dire Consequences of Devastated Motherhood and Daring Daughters—A Diasporic Perspective of Chitra Banerjee's *Before We Visit The Goddess*" by V. Samuel Morris and M. Poonkodi, the focus is on the mother-daughter relationship and the challenges they face both in India and abroad. The narrative follows three generations of female protagonists, illustrating how they break societal rules, navigate difficult situations, and ultimately redeem themselves through their determination and resilience. In "The West Indian Americans" (2001), Holger Henke argues that economic connections and public policy have influenced the migration of Caribbean immigrants to the U.S.A. He asserts that a combination of issues related to class, gender, and race within the Caribbean islands has driven a continuous stream of migrants to the U.S.A. in pursuit of a better life.

In this research, a Qualitative Research methodology will be chosen as the primary sources are literary texts, precluding the inclusion of specific quantitative data for analysis. Literary pieces written by selected literary stalwarts will be used as empirical sources, while published articles and books on those literary figures, including interviews, reviews, and other dissertations, will be included as secondary references. An attempt is made to analyse the changing scenario of diaspora in different geographical spaces and cultural domains, extending beyond the historical context of the dispersal of the Jews.

1. Hybridity, Resistance, and Rebirth in Transnational Spaces:

There are many seminal works of Caribbean American writers—Julia Alvarez, Elizabeth Nunez, and Naomi Jackson—which explore how identity, race, and gender shape migrant narratives. Particularly in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (2000),

the experience of migration from the Dominican Republic to America is rendered through a diasporic lens, exposing tensions between assimilation and cultural retention. Lucia M. Suarez notes that Alvarez “exposes her plight of identity caught between assimilation into US mainstream culture and contestation of the very mechanisms of assimilation” (Suarez 117).

The García family's transition from affluence in the Dominican Republic to marginalization in the United States highlights their struggle with displacement. The sisters—Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, and Sofia—face alienation due to their ethnicity and gender. Initially longing for their homeland, they gradually embrace American life. Yet this Americanization comes at a cost. As the sisters recall:

[W]e sisters wailed and paled, whining to go home. We didn't feel we had the best the United States had to offer. We had only second-hand stuff, rental houses in one red-neck Catholic neighbourhood after another....Cooped up in those little...houses, the rules were as strict as for Island girls but there was no island to make up the difference. (Alvarez 107)

Despite their adaptation, the girls' parents, Carlos and Laura, feared losing them to American culture and thus insisted on summer trips back to the Dominican Republic to reconnect with ‘la familia’. This tension between cultural heritage and new identity often left the girls conflicted. Carla, for example, was racially taunted and sexually harassed, experiences that haunted her:

“Sometimes when she woke in the dark, they were perched at the foot of her bed, a grim chorus of urchin faces, boys without bodies, chanting without words, ‘Go back! Go back!’” (Alvarez 165).

Carla's trauma reflects her internalized fear and the ongoing struggle to belong. Similarly, Yolanda voices her resentment of being an outsider:

“For hundredth time, I cursed my immigrant origins....I too would have suntanned parents... and I would say things like ‘no shit,’ without feeling like I was imitating someone else” (Alvarez 95).

These expressions underscore how the girls grapple with fragmented identities in a foreign culture. Alienated from both home and host lands, their sense of belonging becomes elusive. Yolanda, in a moment of loneliness, turns to religion rather than American childhood comforts:

“Had I been raised with the traditions of stuffed animals, I would have hugged my bear...Instead, I...took out the crucifix...This large crucifix had

been a ‘security blanket’...after coming to this country” (Alvarez 100).

Even Laura, the mother, tries to carve a space for herself through invention, but the daughters feel neglected, needing guidance to navigate the complexities of their new life:

“Important...things...their own mother...didn't have a second to help them puzzle any of this out” (Alvarez 138).

Over time, the sisters come to understand that their hyphenated identities must be accepted despite the challenges:

“It is a difficult place, this country, before you get used to it. You have to not take things personal” (Alvarez 170).

Through Alvarez's narrative, the diasporic journey of the García family reveals the constant negotiation of identity, the pain of cultural dislocation, and the difficult embrace of hybridity in the American racial and cultural landscape.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni deals with recurring themes such as migration, alienation, dissimulation, nostalgia, homeland, and the protagonists' determined efforts to break free from the rigid traditional norms of the East while embracing the liberating ethos of American society. Her narratives often center around Bengali women who migrate to America following marriage, highlighting the ensuing cross-cultural conflict. Drawing from her own experiences as a migrant, Divakaruni delves into issues of socio-cultural dislocation, racial prejudice, and the struggle to assimilate into American society. Her characters, much like herself, are imbued with a deep sense of selfhood and dignity, which empowers them to overcome adversity and emerge triumphant. Her debut collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* (1995), offers a nuanced exploration of the institution of marriage, delving into themes of love and betrayal, sorrow and renunciation, all within the confines of patriarchal structures. Through eleven compelling stories featuring both immigrant and non-immigrant women, Divakaruni portrays the diverse trajectories of her female protagonists as they navigate the complexities of cultural transition and embark on a quest for identity and self-definition.

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's second story, “*Clothes*,” the nuances of cultural identity and personal transformation are delicately interwoven. At the heart of the narrative lies Sumita's arranged marriage to Somesh, which sets her on a journey from India to the United States—a transition that becomes symbolic of her evolving identity. The story begins with the traditional bride-viewing ritual, during which Sumita, like many young women, dreams of a fairytale marriage to a “handsome prince” who will take

her to a distant, promising land (AM 18). Her hopes are partly fulfilled, as Somesh turns out to be a considerate partner who supports her ambitions of becoming a teacher and gifts her contemporary American clothes. These new garments symbolize not just a change in geography, but also a growing sense of confidence and selfhood—distinct from the constraints of her native culture, where the sari represents traditional expectations of womanhood.

Tragically, Somesh's sudden death halts their shared aspirations. However, rather than retreating into the regressive gender roles and mourning customs of her homeland—where widows are often reduced to invisible existences—Sumita chooses to remain in America. Her decision reflects her desire to honour both her husband's dreams and her own, by assimilating into American society without entirely abandoning her cultural values. She recognizes that returning to India would mean the erasure of her autonomy and identity:

“That's when I know I can't go back... all over India, at this very moment widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads... Doves with cut-off wings.” (AM 33)

The story closes with Sumita standing before a mirror, preparing to confront an uncertain future:

“I tilt my chin... In the mirror a woman holds my gaze... She wears a blouse and skirt the colour of almonds.” (AM 33)

This image underscores her resolve to forge a new identity—rooted in her Indian heritage but branching out into the liberating possibilities of her migrated life.

“*Clothes*” engages deeply with the complexities of identity negotiation, cultural hybridity, and the challenges of reterritorialization. Sumita's journey from India to America is not just physical but metaphorical—marking a passage from collective tradition to individual self-definition. Her transformation mirrors the broader experience of many diasporic subjects who navigate between the pull of homeland values and the push toward assimilation in a host country. Divakaruni uses the motif of clothing as a metaphor for cultural transition and identity reformation. The sari, emblematic of Sumita's traditional upbringing, gradually gives way to Western attire, which becomes a medium through which she experiences personal agency and reinvention. Yet this adoption of a new wardrobe does not signify wholesale cultural abandonment. Rather, it marks a process of hybridization—a conscious blending of her Indian roots with the freedom and possibilities that America offers. This hybrid identity is neither fixed nor entirely secure, but it is chosen, embodied, and asserted.

Somesh's death becomes a critical turning point. In many traditional Indian settings, widowhood is synonymous with erasure—socially, sexually, and emotionally. By choosing to stay in the United States, Sumita refuses to conform to the role of the self-effacing widow. Her resolve to remain is a form of resistance—against patriarchy, against cultural fatalism, and against the symbolic violence of being reduced to “a dove with cut-off wings.” Divakaruni's story is an exploration of diaspora not as exile, but as a space of possibility—where identity is not inherited but created. Sumita's final image in the mirror, dressed in almond-coloured Western clothes, captures the essence of her rebirth. Her gaze, “apprehensive yet steady,” reflects the courage of a woman stepping into a liminal space where the borders between cultures blur, and where selfhood is crafted at the intersection of memory, loss, and hope.

Certainly. Here's a scholarly and cohesive conclusion that ties together the major arguments of the chapter:

III. CONCLUSION

The diasporic journeys depicted in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's “Clothes” reflect a shared terrain of dislocation, hybridity, and self-fashioning that shapes the lived realities of migrant women. Through nuanced portrayals of cultural alienation and gendered expectations, both authors illuminate how migration is not merely a geographical crossing, but a profound transformation of identity. Alvarez's García sisters and Divakaruni's Sumita navigate the turbulent spaces between cultural retention and assimilation, negotiating not only racial and ethnic otherness but also the burden of patriarchal structures within both home and host cultures. The narratives underscore that identity in the diaspora is never static—it is fractured, fluid, and continually reassembled in response to shifting cultural and emotional landscapes. The García sisters' struggle to find belonging in a racially stratified America mirrors Sumita's assertion of agency in the wake of personal loss. While the former wrestle with the pressures of Americanization and the yearning for homeland, the latter embraces the liminal space of the immigrant experience as a site for reinvention. Both texts reveal that diasporic women must negotiate dual marginalities—as immigrants and as women—yet in doing so, they carve out hybrid identities that are empowered, chosen, and resilient. Alvarez and Divakaruni offer powerful critiques of cultural essentialism, illustrating how the diasporic condition, with all its fractures and contradictions, can also be a site of creative self-determination. The tension between memory and reinvention, tradition and transformation, becomes not

a limitation but a generative force through which new subjectivities emerge. These narratives affirm that in the complex dance between belonging and estrangement, it is possible to reclaim voice, agency, and a sense of home—however hybrid or unsettled it may be.

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